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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on those aspects of which teachers must be aware when teaching university students in Hong Kong. These aspects include cultural factors, the influence of political, social, and educational developments in Hong Kong over the years, and the students' feelings of achievement in attending the university. In terms of language, teachers must be aware that pronunciation difficulties of a major nature--those, that is, which impede mutual comprehension--will be a part of the speech of most of the students. There will also likely be interference from the students' first language at the level of syntax. Chinese university students typically do not speak out in discussion in the way students from other cultures might. Discussion also centers on the possible conflict between their native cultural values and the lure of modern industrialized society. The fact that these students are caught between two cultures is reflected in the way they are caught between English and Chinese. (JK)

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Facing Reality in University English Teaching in Hong Kong

Joseph P. Boyle

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

China has always presented a challenge to the West. It is immense numerically, yet relatively weak politically. It has been Communist since the take-over in 1949, yet its communism now takes the form of enterprising business deals, often arranged through Hong Kong banks. Its language is one of the hardest for "gweilos" - foreign devils - to learn, with a written script that takes even the Chinese themselves a life-time to master. Its people appear to be shy, quiet and passive, yet they can be the shrewdest, most aggressive business men and women you could meet.

I am talking now about China in general - a thing which is always dangerous. For China, like India, America, or Britain for that matter, is a geographical block which goes under the name of one nation, but which is composed of very different cultures, customs and dialects. Nevertheless China has an ethnic unity about it which is remarkable. Ask a Chinese in London, New York, Calcutta or Manila what race he belongs to and he will wonder what you are talking about - he is Chinese. That is, he - or at least his ancestors - came from mainland China, and he probably has a lurking desire to return there himself before he dies.

This massive fact of Chinese nationalism has to be borne in mind whether one is teaching Chinese people in England, South America, India or the Philippines. I choose these places because I have in fact taught

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Chinese students in all of them, and am now doing so in Hong Kong, in the Chinese University.

In this paper I want to consider the reality that faces a non-Chinese University teacher of English in present-day Hong Kong. I will look at the "Chinese-ness" of the students as an important factor; at the influence of the historical/sociological situation of Hong Kong; at the educational system which produces the kind of students we get in the Universities; and in the light of these factors, the important question of what kind of course we should be offering in the English Department: should it be special-purpose teaching - ESP, to fit the needs of a pragmatic, business community - or a more literary approach to language teaching which fits the Chinese traditional reverence for literature and the scholar?

First, the "Chinese-ness" of the students. Our Hong Kong students are mostly first generation Hong Kong - that is, the majority of their parents came from the mainland, many of them about the time of the communist take-over. They arrived with nothing in many cases. Through self-sacrificing hard work they gave their children an educational opportunity. The children take it to the full, and work extremely hard. The kind of student I see walk by me every day is tight-lipped, rather drawn looking, in a hurry, with a couple of large books under his arm and an appointment to keep at the computer centre. A favourite booking time for the computer room is 11-12 at night, the final hour of the day. I asked one student why this was so. "Because then you can work on all night", he said; "you see, they don't shut down the computers."

I had experience of this single-minded, colossally hard-working side to the Chinese student in England, before going to teach in Hong

Kong. I was running a crash course for a dozen selected students, from the mainland of China, who were beginning specialist work in different British universities. The language laboratory of the language centre opened at 9.00 a.m. There was always a little queue of Chinese students waiting to go in as soon as the door opened. The more easy-going students who turned up at 9.30 found all the booths were already taken. First then, there is the industry of the Chinese student.

Secondly, there is a certain feeling of national pride, not to say superiority. China has always been "the middle Kingdom" and the rest of the world "barbarians" to some extent. Chinese want to learn English as a useful tool for progress in the modern world, not as a means to enrich their culture by drawing on another - they feel quietly confident that their own is rich enough.

However, it is not as simple as that. The Chinese in Hong Kong are betwixt-and-between. They know well their future depends on their business/banking, import/export economy. To do good business with other nations you have to understand their language; but to do better business you have to understand their customs and culture.

I do not want to give the impression, in what is bound to be rather a sweeping glance at the Chinese character of Hong Kong people, that they are unpleasantly materialistic. Most foreign teachers find their Chinese pupils wholly delightful and thoroughly enjoy teaching them. But the head-down pushiness of Hong Kong society is something which even the most casual visitor notices at once.

Hong Kong was originally an island of fishermen and pirates, a busy port which attracted a fairly rough section of Chinese society. The British overlords treated the Chinese coolies in much the same way

as they did the natives in other colonies: they despised them and had little to do with them. Few British made any attempt to learn the language, Cantonese. In fact Samuel Bonham, the governor between 1848 and 1854 refused to promote any of his staff who learned Chinese.

The influence of early missionaries can be seen in the programme for education proposed by the Anglican Bishop, George Smith, the chairman of the education committee in 1852. Half the day was to be given to scripture and books composed by foreigners, the other half of the day to the Chinese classics. But broader views existed. In 1853 the policy of the educational committee of Hong Kong is described by Endacott, in his constitutional history of the colony as being, "to encourage the study of English not only for the value of its literature but "to prevent misunderstanding" and act as a "bond of union between the many thousands of Chinese who have made this place their residence and the handful of Europeans by whom they are governed".[1]

We might say "sociolinguistic attitudes" were in the air. English for communication was in.

Hong Kong had a particularly sensitive governor from 1877-82 in John Pope Hennessy. He aroused the anger of the British residents by taking steps to improve the social status of the Chinese in the colony. He even allowed the natives to buy land and live in the European area of town. Nevertheless, Hennessy saw English as being the most important language for the schools and in 1878 his education conference decreed that the teaching of English should be the primary concern of government education, with five hours per day being given to English instruction - and this should be compulsory, whereas only two and a half hours should be given to Chinese instruction - and this should be voluntary.

For all its good intention, however, the policy did not work. It turned out people who could function comfortably in neither language. Chinese written characters have to be learned and practised from early years and need a lot of time. Under Hennessy's system there was not sufficient time to become proficient in written Chinese. Moreover, the English the pupils learned in school was soon forgotten when they left, since they had few dealings with English speaking people after school. The same, incidentally, is largely true today.

By the end of the 19th century the then governor, Robinson, was lamenting the fact that more than half a century of British rule had failed to make the Chinese much less Chinese: "It is extraordinary," he said, "not to say discreditable, that after fifty five years of British rule, the vast majority of Chinese in Hong Kong should remain so little anglicised."[2]

In the early days of the 20th century pressure came from not only the English community, but also from the increasingly vocal Chinese community to have separate education for English and Chinese pupils. The emphasis was now being placed not on educating all Chinese to the same level, but on educating an elite, though to his credit Joseph Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for Britain questioned the governor's policy, saying that "it would need very strong grounds to justify withholding government assistance from vernacular education in a large community such as exists in Hong Kong, thereby presumably excluding the very poorest from the benefits of education."[3]

I will not go into much more detail on the historical shifts in attitude to English-versus-Chinese education over this century, because it is extremely complicated. Briefly, from the time in 1907 that the

new governor, Frederick Lugard's wife began to learn Chinese for two hours a day, and through learning more about the Chinese dared to suggest that the yellow races might even be superior to the white, a new attitude can be seen among government officials to the question of English and Chinese language.

By the early nineteen fifties, after the political upheaval had taken place on the mainland, the Keswick report recommended that Hong Kong should be a centre not only for teaching the Chinese about England, but also "a centre for interpreting Chinese concepts to England and the West, a centre where Chinese and English thought can meet at all levels, and where comparative studies of language and philosophy can be developed."[4] This was a far cry from the early colonial imperialist attitudes.

The University of Hong Kong, opened by Lugard in 1912 had found from the start that while English was the more useful language academically, it did not fully satisfy the students' cultural aspirations, and left them unfit in some cases to express themselves deeply in either Chinese or English. In 1963 the Chinese University of Hong Kong was founded, to give an opportunity for higher education in the medium of Chinese, principally for students who had attended Chinese schools.

How do things work out in practice? Only a small fraction of pupils reach the top of the educational pyramid in Hong Kong. Last year over 30,000 sixth rorm pupils sat examination aimed at entry to the two Universities. Only 2,800 of these could get places. From the Chinese University's point of view, regrettably the initial idea of the founding colleges has grown dim: pupils from Chinese schools constitute a small

proportion of our students, most of whom come from Anglo-Chinese schools. The reason for this is that the Anglo-Chinese schools turn out pupils who are not only superior in English ability, but also superior in general education. Hence they win the few places available. Throughout the 20th century English-medium schools have grown in importance over Chinese-medium schools. Two years ago the number of English medium schools constituted 80 percent of all secondary schools in Hong Kong. The Chinese middle schools are looked on as being inferior.

I take extramural classes a couple of times a week in Business English, the students being mostly office workers at various levels, and in Medical English, the students here being mostly nurses, plus a few mainland Chinese doctors. When I ask these students about their educational background there is noticeable embarrassment when they tell me they attended a Chinese middle school. The English of such students is very weak. They have a good grounding in grammar and mechanically learned vocabulary. Their reading knowledge of English is reasonably good. But their ability to communicate in English is extremely weak. Yet the level they will need to reach is high.

With the Business students, both the extramural students I have mentioned, and also in my regular University Business English classes, their passive knowledge of the language can be activated with a little ingenuity and imagination. The Business section of the local paper, the South China Morning Post, or the Asian Wall Street Journal provide excellent teaching material. A couple of examples of the kind of language the students have to handle:

1. The South China Morning Post
Headline. "Pact to aid yen tipped".

Text. "The dollar finished the week stronger in Tokyo at Y 247.5 after some modest yen support operations by the bank in Japan. Trading was affected by speculation that a yen defence package may be cobbled together over the week-end, and the market was still uncertain about what to make of the US/Iran confrontation."[5]

2. The Asian Wall Street Journal
Headline. "Japanese support of atomic power cools; U.S. extends moratorium on new reactors."

Text. "Japan escaped a repetition of the Three Mile Island accident last week by a hair's breadth. The leakage of cooling water at a nuclear power station in Fukui prefecture is intensifying misgivings among residents of the crowded area. The Nuclear Regulatory Committee will extend its moratorium on new nuclear plants until it finishes weighing the lessons of the Three Mile Island accident."[6]

It can be seen at once that a fair command of English would be needed to follow this kind of business reporting. I believe that texts from business journalism provide excellent material for ESP Business English teaching, in that they mix business terminology with idiomatic, bright English, thus preventing the texts from becoming too heavy and boring, the great danger of much ESP material. They also keep the texts in the "real" world.

Which brings me back to my question - the reality which we University teachers have to face in our students. There are the cultural factors which I have mentioned; there is the influence of the political, social and educational developments in Hong Kong over the years; there is the students' feeling of achievement in reaching the top of the educational pyramid, in getting a precious University place; in knowing they are among the brightest. But what about their actual language ability? Their English at first seems amazingly weak, given that they have studied it for so many years in school, and that they are

the best pupils the schools are producing. A teacher has to accept that pronunciation difficulties of a major nature - those, that is, which impede mutual comprehension - will be a part of the speech of most of his pupils. /l/ and /n/ sound the same to the Cantonese ear, so that the Cantonese word for you, neih is pronounced neih or leih with no apparent difference being felt by the Cantonese speaker. This carries over into English and can cause confusion of the no/low, not/lot kind. The confusion of /l/ and /r/ is the joke caricature of the Chinese speaker, - "velly nice" - but I have found that in fact it causes less breakdowns in communication that one might think. Cantonese has no vowel sounds /ae/ /ə/ and /ə:/, (as in bad, about, her) but these cause few communication problems with Cantonese speakers of English. /s/ and /ʃ/ cause real difficulty at times, since the Cantonese sound, used in many common words like book, shue or ship, shuen, lies between /s/ and /ʃ/ - /sʃ/. /v/ and /w/ are often confused; and /f/ and /θ/ is another pronunciation difficulty serious enough to cause confusion in comprehension.

The reality which a teacher of Chinese students must face is that even after much practice his students will probably be still making the same "mistake" - if you like to call it that. The physical speech habits established from childhood will hardly be changed by a few fervent admonitions and some acceptance of the Chinese variety of spoken English is necessary.

The same holds true for interference from the students' first language at the level of syntax. If we accept that the syntax of a language is a reflection of the way a particular people looks at the

world, it is not surprising that the ingrained thought categories will prevail over foreign, learned rules of expression.

A couple of small examples illustrate this. Cantonese verbs are not inflected. In the two sentences Gumyaht lokyue and tingyaht lokyue the verb is identical, but is translated in the first by is raining and in the second by will-rain, because the time word, today, in the first sentence and tomorrow, in the second, makes it obvious what is meant. On the other hand, the Chinese say, for instance: Yanwaih gum gwai, soyih ngoh mmaih, literally, Because so dear, therefore I not buy, whereas English would say either Because it was so dear, I didn't buy it; or, It was so (very) dear; therefore I didn't buy it. Here the Chinese mind feels the logic of "Because ... therefore ..." must be spelt out.

Anything like a full examination of the syntactic contrasts between English and Cantonese is far beyond our present scope. All I wish to remind us of is that ingrained ways of expressing reality will hardly be changed.

Another aspect of reality which we must accept in the Chinese University is that our students will not speak out in discussion the way you would find with students from other cultures. Role-play helps, because in this the students can take refuge in this way: what I am saying is what the character in the role-play thinks, not what I myself think. So someone else can contradict this and I lose no face. But if I go out on a limb in a real discussion and say what I really think, clearly I take a risk. Someone who feels the opposite may get out his little saw and saw my branch off, so to speak. I risk bumping down with a great deal of embarrassment. And there is truth, I do believe, in the

commonly made observation that Asians are more sensitive about losing face than Westerners are.

I have found drama about the most effective way of overcoming the natural reticence of many Chinese, especially when you can find a part which suits the national characteristics of the people. Better still, if the students themselves write the script of their playlets this can be very successful. Most Chinese are interested in business. A play some of them wrote for me about the takeover of the lucrative Hong Kong to Macau tourist trade run by a rival company was a revelation to me, in the way my most reserved students suddenly became ruthless articulate tycoons.

A broader aspect of the reality which I face in my students in Hong Kong is the lack of social concern among most of them. Normally, University students are the first to be concerned for the less privileged members of society. In the developed world students tend to be the radicals - though as a cynical friend once pointed out to me, they swing gradually to the right after they get jobs and keep going right, the further they get away from student grants and the fatter their paycheck. Hong Kong students are by and large extremely unconcerned about the underprivileged, though of course there are some exceptions. Accordingly I have run an experiment for the last couple of years, getting some of my English majors to volunteer to teach English in the refugee camps, where Vietnamese refugees, of Chinese ethnic origin, are waiting to be moved on to other host countries. This exercise in sensitising our students to the plight of the really needy of society has been beneficial to all concerned.

I have left to the end one of the most complicated sides to the reality of our teaching situation. To what extent should University teachers in a place like Hong Kong let society dictate to the University and to what extent should the University try to give its values to society? Our students come to university with one big aim - to get a lucrative job. Yet we in the English Department have to do more than teach our students to become merely more efficient money-making machines. Literature is par excellence a vehicle for challenging young people with the higher values in life. And respect for these higher values is very much part of the Chinese tradition.[7] Poetry takes people beyond pragmatism. Yet sadly I must admit that my experience in Hong Kong so far leads me to believe that the pull of the computer, the electronic toy and the stock exchange is stronger by far for the vast majority of our students than the grace of language in a beautiful poem. If this were true only of English I would be less worried; but my colleagues in the Chinese Department tell me that precious few students have any feel for language even in Chinese.

This leads us to question the educational system in Hong Kong and to ask whether the growing strength of the movement to have Chinese the medium of education in the schools and to have English taught as a foreign language might not be worth considering again. It is an old chestnut for Hong Kong. But it is precisely old chestnuts that can put out shoots when the time is ripe and grow into trees.

I do not know the answer myself. I will be very glad if any of you would like to comment from your different viewpoints in the ELT world. I can see clearly on the one hand that you must give young people the ability to express their deepest, subtlest and sometimes confused

thoughts in language which comes as near as possible to the complexity of their reality. On the other hand the Chinese are very practical people: they know that their economic future lies in production, business, marketing, trade. The English they want is the English which will help them do this better. Whether this will so exhaust their energies that they cannot develop a specifically Hong Kong Chinese culture is a moot point.

These, then, are some of the aspects of the reality of our situation in the Chinese University. Our students are very Chinese, and feel strong links with the mainland; at the same time they are Westernized in many ways and do not relish the thought of becoming part of communist China when the lease runs out in 1997. Most of them would say they like life the way it is, busy, almost frantic at times, but surrounded by plenty of the good things of life. Their Chinese loyalty and their Western way of life cause a real dilemma for them. And the fact that they are caught between two cultures is reflected in the way they are caught between two languages.

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7. See for example, Teng Ssu-yu and John K Fairbank, China's Response to the West: a Documentary Survey, 1839-1923. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 185, which quotes Liu Yueh Yun, a Chinese intellectual.

   "The technique of the barbarians is merely that of a worker, of which a gentleman would not care to speak, and which a scholar and an official would despise ... We despised mechanical civilisation and did not try to develop it. Instead we seek for larger and higher purposes."